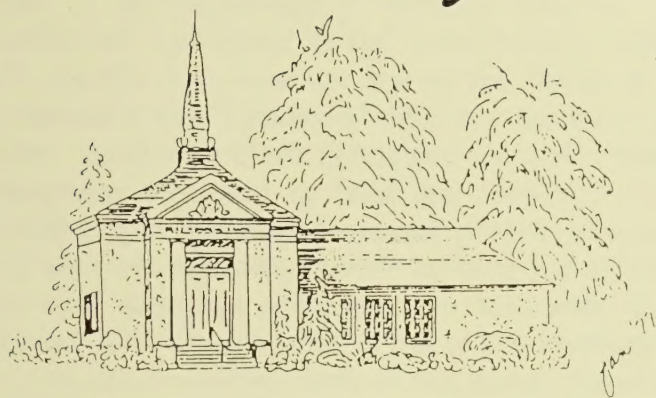


A Brief History of



Pioneer  
Presbyterian  
Church  
on Clatsop Plains

33324 Patriot Way  
(Highway 101 at Camp Rilea entrance)  
Warrenton, Oregon 97146  
(503) 861-2421



The Pioneer Presbyterian Church on Clatsop Plains has played its part in the beginnings of Western America. The Lower Columbia area has many "firsts" in its history: Robert Gray (1792) was the first over the bar of the "River of the West" and named it the "Columbia" after his American ship out of Boston; Lewis and Clark (1805-06) were the first to cross the American continent by land and wintered at Fort Clatsop, located only a few miles from our church; John Jacob Astor (1810) sent out expeditions both by land and by sea to establish the first American settlement on the Pacific Coast, named "Astoria." Our church itself is the oldest Presbyterian Church in continuous existence west of the Rocky Mountains. We were not first, but earlier Presbyterian churches did not last: the Whitman Mission (1836), located near Walla Walla, Washington, was destroyed forever with the Indian massacre of 1847; another Presbyterian church was founded at Oregon City (1844), but became a Congregational Church after the California Gold Rush. So we remain the oldest Presbyterian church in existence in the far Western United States.

#### THE BEGINNINGS

William Henry Gray first came west with the Whitman party in 1836 as a lay worker. After serving with Marcus Whitman at Wailatpu, and with Henry Spalding at the Lapwai Mission, he migrated to the Willamette Valley and worked with Jason Lee at the Salem Mission. Gray participated in the meeting of western settlers at Champoege in 1843, when they voted to join the infant United States. Around 1845 he filed on a Donation Land Claim on Clatsop Plains.

Rev. Lewis Thompson was a Presbyterian minister who graduated from Princeton Seminary in New Jersey. He was opposed to slavery, and left his native Kentucky after freeing the slaves who were kept on his father's estate. He found the views supporting slavery no different in Missouri, so he joined the wagon train of 1844 to migrate to the Oregon frontier. Once here, he took up a land claim located just south of our present church property.



Gray, who had been a Presbyterian in his home state of New York, invited Rev. Thompson to conduct services and to preach a sermon in the Gray home on September 19, 1846. Invited to join in worship were friends and neighbors, among whom were Alva & Ruth Condit, Robert & Nancy Morrison, Mr. & Mrs. Truman Powers, and Mr. & Mrs. John Adair. Other members soon joined them, and their meetings alternated between the homes of the Grays and the Morrisons for the next four years.

### THE BUILDINGS

By 1850 it had become apparent that a permanent meeting place was both necessary and desirable. Robert Morrison gave a "bond deed" (a copy of which is on the church history wall), by which he donated one acre of land for a cemetery and four acres for a church. At that time, Morrison had no legal title to the land, simply because no agency of government existed in the new frontier which could bestow fee-simple ownership. Morrison later received a patent to his land signed by President Grant in 1869 (a copy of which also is on the church history wall). With the title to his land secure, Morrison made good on his bond to cede the land to the church. Later it was found that part of the land ceded had been in Mrs. Morrison's share of the claim, but the family quickly corrected this oversight.



William H. Gray had been trained as a cabinet maker, and he contracted to erect the first building. It stood on the site of the present church building, and was 20 feet by 30 feet, complete with pews and windows, painted on the exterior and cost \$1,500! A model of this structure, reputed to have been built by an early member, Robert S. McEwan, is on display in the present building. The original building housed the gathered congregation until 1873, when a severe windstorm demolished it. A new building, largely the gift of Alva & Ruth Condit, was constructed to the east of the present building at the bottom of the hill. This building lasted until 1929, when the present structure was erected on the exact site of the first building.

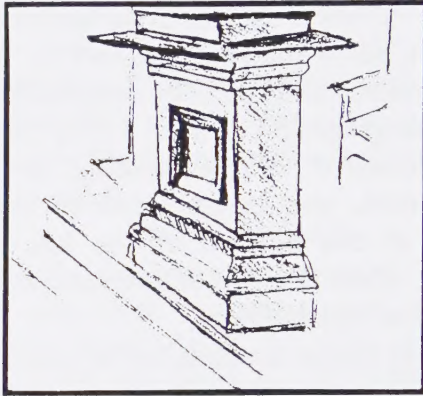
The meeting house constructed in 1873 had worn out from more than fifty years of community use. A new building was planned, but the projected cost of \$15,000 seemed out of reach for the small, rural congregation. Nonetheless they gathered sufficient funds to proceed on its construction, and willing hands donated early labor on the building. The three-foot-thick walls of the foundation are the result of these early volunteers. The completion of the construction was assured when the daughter of the Grays, Mrs. Jacob Kamm, donated \$10,000 for that purpose. The only condition of the gift was that the sanctuary be named the "Gray Memorial Chapel." The basement provides space for the Christian education program and kitchen facilities for church functions. Offices for the staff on the main level were later additions.

#### THE PULPIT

In 1850 a log that had been washed up on a nearby beach was hauled to the Morrison mill. Here it was sawed and whipsawed to desirable proportions. Robert S. McEwan then constructed a pulpit which served the church for many years. When a new church was established at nearby Cannon Beach, this historic furnishing was loaned to that new congregation. When a pulpit was built there, the McEwan pulpit was loaned to a new congregation in Beaverton, Oregon. After several

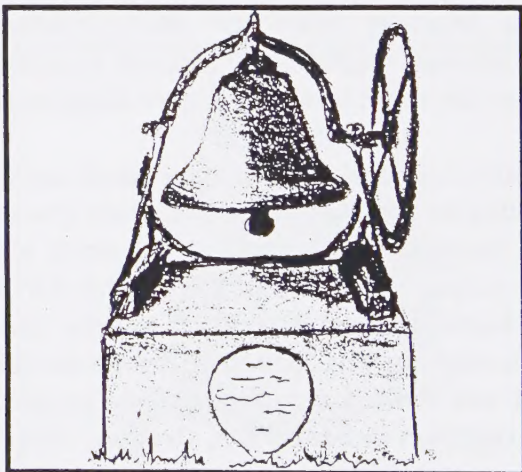


years of service there, it was returned to Pioneer Presbyterian Church, where it was refinished and placed once again in our sanctuary, where it will never be lost or forgotten.



#### THE BELL

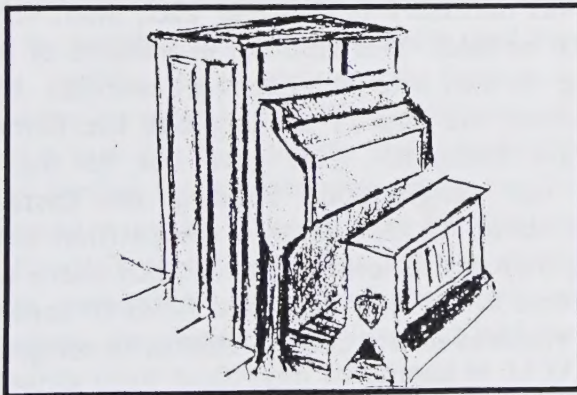
The sharp, lean lines of our present steeple, which is characteristic of many New England chapels, does not allow a bell to be hung high. For the first twenty years after the chapel was built, there was no church bell to ring people to worship here. At the end of World War II, the Alderbrook Presbyterian Church in Astoria, Oregon was being demolished. A man named Chester Bell, who lived on Clatsop Plains, was the crane operator who lifted the bell from the tower.



Difficulty in receiving payment for his work led to Mr. Bell taking the bell as a substitute and mounting it at his home as a representation of his family name. Pioneer Presbyterian Church offered to buy the bell, but its owner insisted on presenting it as his gift to the church in 1949, expressing his desire to hear it once again being rung in the community. In 1967 the original mounting was replaced by the present concrete foundation. No record exists as to the early history of the bell. It is stamped "Cinn. Bell Co." and bears the figure "34."

### THE ORGANS

At the side of the front of the sanctuary stands a reed organ manufactured in 1905 by the Estey Organ Company of Brattleboro, Vermont. It originally was built as a pump organ with a one-year warranty, but had been made electronic prior to its coming to Pioneer Church. It was acquired in 1949 from a church in the vicinity of Grays Harbor or Willapa Bay, Washington, and was dedicated during the pastorate of Rev. Hugh Mitchelmore. It was paid for by the Tagg-Fertig families in memory of their mother, and it served faithfully for nearly fifty years. In the late 1980's the organ was completely overhauled, the cost again being underwritten by the Tagg-Fertig families. The reconstruction took nine months, but the artisans doing the work this time provided a twenty-five-year warranty on their work!

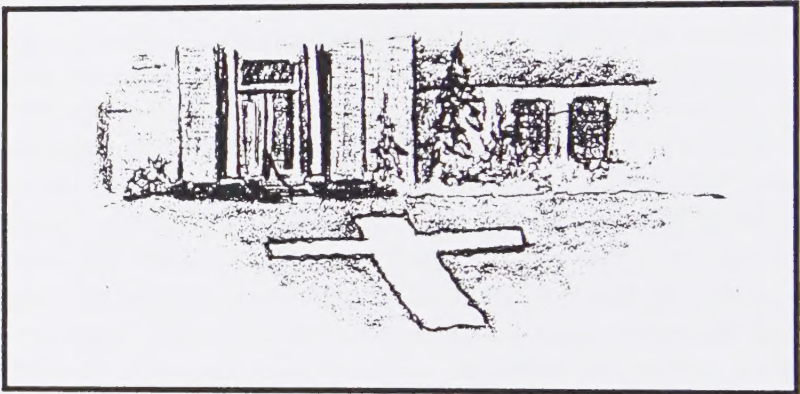




The organ at the side of the rear of the sanctuary is a digital computer organ manufactured by the Allen Organ Company of Macungie, Pennsylvania. It was the gift of Mrs. Edyth Baldwin, in memory of her husband, Dr. T. Rex Baldwin, a former Mayor of Gearhart, Oregon, and was presented to the church on November 18, 1984.

#### THE EASTER CROSS

Probably no single activity of our church draws more attention—especially from the motoring public passing by on U.S. Highway 101—than does the building of the Easter Cross on the front lawn facing the busy highway. It serves to announce the Easter season and to remind all passersby of our celebration of Christ's death and resurrection each year.



Prior to World War II, Clatsop Plains was one of the premiere growing areas for daffodil bulbs. As the plants flowered, it was necessary to deflower each plant to make a better bulb to be sold. This resulted in millions of beautiful blooms being thrown into neighboring landfills. One bulb grower conceived the idea of spelling out the name of his farm in yellow daffodils. This gave rise to the idea of members of our congregation building the Easter Cross, which began about 1943. Foreign competition ended the bulb growing industry following the war, but there were still plenty of blooms in the now neglected fields to continue our tradition. It requires nearly 50,000 blooms to completely fill



in the forty-foot long cross, and it became increasingly difficult to obtain adequate numbers of blooms as the bulbs in the fields gradually died out. To preserve the tradition, the congregation planted daffodils on church property, which has provided more than enough blooms for daffodil crosses over the years. Despite sore knees, aching backs and spoiled hairdos, the tradition of the Easter Cross continues each year and the surrounding community is reminded of our Christian faith and hope.

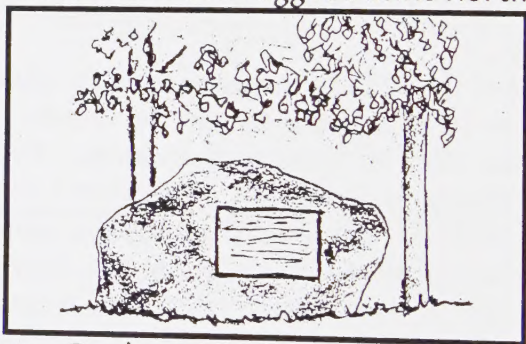
### THE CEMETERY

When the pioneers of 1845 arrived on Clatsop Plains, they had little need for a common burying ground. They were a hardy group who had survived the rigors of the long trek over the almost unmarked Oregon Trail. Robert and Nancy Morrison serve as an excellent example of these sturdy pioneers. They left Missouri on April 1, 1844 and arrived on Clatsop Plains on November 10, 1844. Nancy was later quoted as saying that she had not slept in a house during the entire journey.

The need for a cemetery did arise in 1850, however, when a human body washed up on the beach and when a young man was killed in a gunshot accident. This prompted the Morrison family to give a plot of land for a cemetery, and the terms of their gift specified that anyone could be buried in the cemetery and that no charge for the burial was to be made. Additional land was later purchased. Maintenance was provided by members of the community, and involved cutting back the prolific grass and scotch broom and repairing damage done by vandals. By 1940 maintenance had become too great a task for the church, and a legislative act passed that year deeded the cemetery property to Clatsop County, who imposed a modest tax to pay for the upkeep by the County Road Department. One of the conditions of the change in ownership was that there would be no further burials unless the person to be interred had been a resident of the county prior to Oregon statehood in 1859. Spouses of

pioneers were entitled to be buried in the cemetery, but few people now living are eligible for burial here at the present. The last persons buried in the cemetery were the granddaughter of the Morrisons, Nancy Tagg (1983), and her husband Harold (1984).

The names on the headstones in the cemetery are those of families who were genuine pioneers of this western outpost; among them are the Hobsons, the Gearharts, the Carnahans, the Condit, and the Morrisons. Many visitors pause at the grave of Solomon Smith, who was a mill owner, a state senator, and Oregon's first school teacher, and the grave of his wife, Celiast, who was the daughter of Coboway, the Chief of the Clatsop tribe during the time of Lewis & Clark. A plot map of the existing graves was made in 1976, but many others about whom we know little or nothing also are buried here in now unmarked graves. They silently represent the kind of people who had the courage, strength, and persistence to settle this rugged Pacific Northwest coast.



Pioneer Presbyterian Church on Clatsop Plains continues to proclaim the faith of its founding members who lived over 150 years ago. It is the same faith that focuses on the love of God expressed in the life, death, and resurrection of His only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, Who "is the same yesterday and today and forever." "Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith" (Hebrews 13:7,8).





“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith”  
(Hebrews 12:1-2)

Historical details for this brochure were gathered by Stanley R. Church, a former member of this church. Illustrations were drawn by Jan Ferguson, a local artist, whose family has been active in this church for many decades.

Rev. Douglas D. Rich, Ph.D., Pastor